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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: May 12, 1955

SUBJECT: U. S. Policy on Berlin

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Authorized by: H. D. Brown
August 4, 1975

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. C. Burke Elbrick, EUR
M. Jean de la Grandville, French Embassy
Mr. Cecil B. Lyon, GER

COPIES TO: EUR - Mr. Elbrick
GER - Mr. Lyon
Berlin
Bonn

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In compliance with Paragraph 8.h., NSC 5404/1, "Seek to persuade the UK and France to adopt the U.S. policy on Berlin..." and in accordance with the Secretary's authorization to proceed as indicated on memorandum of April 22, 1955 from Mr. Merchant to the Secretary, "US Policy on Berlin", I invited M. de la Grandville from the French Embassy to call. I told him that we have been giving some thought to the situation which has arisen in Berlin as a result of the imposition of excessive tolls on the Autobahn.

I said that as M. de la Grandville was aware a meeting had been arranged between the Ambassadors and the Soviet High Commissioner to discuss this subject on May 20 and this might settle the whole matter. On the other hand a solution might not be reached and the situation might degenerate. Although we do not foresee it or expect it in view of the over-all situation in Western Europe, the Soviets might continue to harass Berlin not only with the Autobahn tolls but in time by cutting off both canal and rail traffic. In fact, it was possible that we might again find ourselves in a second blockade. If this were the case, the prestige of all the Allies would be very seriously engaged and we feel we should be considering at this point what steps we should have to take. We might even find ourselves in a position of having to employ some sort of military force. This is, of course a serious matter and we thought it was time that we consult the British and the French Governments about it. It is our view that we must indicate our resolute determination to remain in Berlin even if this should require a show of some military force. We hope the British and French Governments share our view in this. If they do, we would probably want to instruct our Ambassadors in Bonn to discuss possible course of action and have the three Allied military chiefs in West Germany as well as the Commandants in Berlin plan and coordinate such action.

M. de la Grandville

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M. de la Grandville asked if we had any definite plans when we referred to the employment of some military force. It was explained to him that our plans were in no sense definite, particularly as the possibility was so far in the future. However, it was possible we might have to employ military trucks on the highways. We might in the extreme have to attempt some type of military probing action. The whole purpose of the operation would be to see how resolute the Soviets were. Such action, moreover, would not be taken until all diplomatic recourses had been exhausted in both Germany and Moscow. In brief, we were attempting to face up to a problem which never had been really faced in the past. At the time of the last blockade many people had thought that if we had pushed an armored column through over the road or Army trucks, we would have broken the blockade. Today the Allies are in a much stronger position than they were at the time of the blockade in 1948. We think it advisable to start thinking now as to what steps we might take even though they may never be necessary, rather than suddenly finding ourselves faced with a situation and not knowing how far we are prepared to go.

Mr. Elbrick explained to M. de la Grandville that Berlin was a good barometer of the Russian attitude and that it was entirely possible that they were taking the Autobahn toll position in connection with the Austrian treaty offer; in other words, the Soviets were being sweet and nice to the Austrians and allowing this to simmer in over a period on the Germans. At the same time the Soviets were pricking the Germans here and there to remind them that a different German attitude might bring rewards from the Soviets similar to those being extended to the Austrians.

Mr. Elbrick also pointed out to M. de la Grandville that we were not in any way being alarmists but merely trying to look ahead and be prepared.

M. de la Grandville said that he would immediately take the matter up with Paris. He quite understood our position and he considered the Berlin situation serious. He said that he had had little information from Paris other than copies of direct communications between the French Ambassador and the French Commandant in Berlin. He said that he gathered that the Quai d'Orsay had given M. Francois Poncet very much of a free hand in this Berlin question. Although not knowing what their thinking was, he did feel that his Government would be hesitant to say how far they would be willing to go in this matter. Still he thought it was important that we start coordinating our thinking and planning.

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